

Universities still need the namby-pamby stuff

By PETER HALPIN

GUEST EDITORIAL

IT'S TIME for universities to get rid of "the namby-pamby stuff;" enough with "creating theoretical thinkers and analyzers." Such are the entertaining yet regrettably wrong views of Robert Orr, CEO, **Ocean Nutrition Canada**.

Mr. Orr's narrow and decidedly pejorative view of Nova Scotia's education system, in particular our universities, was in response to Chronicle Herald business editor Steve Proctor's recent survey of provincial business leaders about their vision of the future of Nova Scotia (The Chronicle-Herald, May 17).

Since he is the CEO of one of this province's most innovative and entrepreneurial companies, Mr. Orr's opinion should be of interest, particularly about something as important to the future of our province and his enterprise as education, which will always need encouragement to improve.

Yet to hear that theoretical thinking and analysis are no longer needed in business is surprising. I bet Mr. Orr, whose company's work relies on theoretical understanding of biochemistry and nutrition science, spends most of his day communicating, debating ideas and analyzing data.

I would even go so far as to suggest that Mr. Orr occasionally indulges in "namby-pamby stuff" himself. This

"stuff" is the liberal arts — languages, literature, philosophy and history. After all, anyone who is interested in selling an interesting idea is a storyteller, a visionary and a philosopher of the marketplace. Of course, Mr. Orr is looking at the bottom line. But if he couldn't dream the big dreams (the ultimate in namby-pambyism), Mr. Orr probably wouldn't have gone anywhere in the global business world he inhabits.

Mr. Orr's opinion about what it takes to produce "people who lead businesses" is not widely held among business leaders. In fact, quite a contrary view prevails.

In April 2000, 30 of Canada's top high-technology CEOs said in an open letter to the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada: "A liberal arts and science education nurtures skills and talents increasingly valued by modern corporations. Our companies function in a state of constant flux. To prosper we need creative thinkers at all levels of the enterprise who are comfortable dealing with decisions in the bigger context. They must be able to communicate, to reason, create, write and speak for shared purposes: for hiring, training,

managing, marketing and policy-making. In short, they provide leadership."

Most human resource experts and sources agree that the attributes employers most value in employees are problem solving, working with others, overcoming obstacles, creativity, communications skills and ability to articulate a vision. These educational outputs are primarily related to the study of the social sciences and humanities — as Mr. Orr describes it, "the namby-pamby stuff."

In late 2006, the Association of American Colleges and Universities conducted a survey of employers and recent college graduates about what students need to succeed in today's global economy.

When asked to evaluate the skills of potential new hires, business executives placed the greatest emphasis on 1) teamwork skills, 2) critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills and 3) communication skills.

The ability to assemble and organize information from multiple sources and the ability to innovate and think creatively form the second tier of the most-valued skills. While the survey does not show that the ability to work with numbers and understand statistics and proficiency in a foreign language are unimportant to employers, business executives rank them as lower priorities

when it comes to what they are looking for in new employees.

Interestingly, John Risley, chairman of **Clearwater Fine Foods Inc.** and a director of Mr. Orr's company, Ocean Nutrition, said in a profile piece on his successful business career (Canadian Business Magazine, Feb. 26, 2007) that "business people need to spend more time thinking."

On the subject of innovation, Mr. Orr notes on his company's website: "Innovation isn't just creativity; it's the application of creativity." So perhaps Mr. Orr really does understand what we in the universities are trying to do, but he laments our lack of application. But universities are here to encourage the creativity. And Mr. Orr is here to find the applications. We need each other.

This insight into innovation and the importance of creativity is perhaps best illustrated by Ian Clifford, a bachelor of fine arts graduate of NSCAD University recently featured in a Chronicle Herald business article by Silver Donald Cameron.

Mr. Clifford is the innovative, creative and entrepreneurial force be-

hind the ZENN car, an electric car with zero emissions and no noise. According to Mr. Cameron, the ZENN car is "the wave of the future — a real weapon against global warming."

One can assume that Mr. Clifford is the type of business leader "with functional capability" that Mr. Orr wishes to see our universities produce in greater abundance.

In summary, Canada's Top 30 high-technology leaders said it best. "Many of our technology workers began their higher education in the humanities, and they are clearly stronger for it. This was time well spent, not squandered. They have increased their value to our companies, our economy, our culture and themselves by acquiring the level of cultural and civic literacy that the humanities offer."

If this were "namby-pamby stuff" we would argue that we need more of it, not less.

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Early Learning Opportunities Registration

The Halifax Regional School Board will be conducting registration for the Early Learning Opportunities program from May 27 to June 13, 2008.